**VITAL ENERGY**
The Current of Relations

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**Abstract:** ‘Vital energy’ is a central idea in the economies of Panama and Colombia. Known as ‘strength’ or ‘force’, and assembled from the environment, this current connects all activities in the local economies and establishes relationships, from kin to strangers. Humans compose vital energy, but its sources are limited, and it is expended in use. Its availability is a gift from God and part of the unpredictable fortune that faces everyone. This economy exhibits a contrast between a social current and a market currency. It offers a materialist perspective, provides a critique of standard economics, suggests that sharing rather than reciprocity or rational choice is the ‘fundamental’ economic practice, and shows how an economy may be a kind of ritual legitimated by a belief in divine power that is displayed through personal fortune.

**Keywords:** current, force, house economy, markets, sharing, strength, thrift, vital energy

‘Vital energy’ is a central concept and thread in the rural economies of lowland Panama and highland Colombia. Locally termed “strength” or “force,” it is the current of life, and I surmise that it is found in other areas of Latin America as well.\(^1\) Assembled from the environment, this biosocial flow gives vitality and fortune to humans, to animals, and to other living things. It connects all material activities in the local economies and makes and mediates social relationships from near kin to distant strangers.\(^2\)

As the ribbon of life, vital energy has multiple implications. Initially promised by God and gained through the struggle of work, its flow varies and can be lost. Securing strength from the environment is an act of fortune, just as life’s destiny is neither controllable nor revealed to humans. This sanctified economy, however, has a materialist basis that defies division into the material, the social, and the divine.
The current of energy is not the entirety of the local economies, for the people have long been involved with cash and market transactions, but their concept of strength provides a structure for material life and an implicit critique of market economies that presume unlimited growth, calculated risk, and denial of the laws of thermodynamics. Vital energy is limited not only by individual fortune but by its own nature, for unlike a currency its sources are not replaceable in the material world, and it dissipates through use.

Panama and Colombia

My initial and subsequent field studies in Panama and Colombia were serendipitous and fortunate happenings because they led me to the study of house economies. When I began my fieldwork, I had no expectations. I did not know what a house economy was, and I hardly had an image of modern, national economies as presented in popular writings or formal texts. Only to my slowly emerging awareness and surprise did I find systematic economies at the margins of markets where I was located. These economies do not look like anything experienced in industrial economies, and the books that I scoured for help offered little assistance.

I lived in a Panama village with my wife for 18 months during the later 1960s. Located in the interior of the country, the community consisted of 91 households. A decade afterward, I explored with my colleague, Alberto Rivera, house economies in the highlands of Colombia. Panama had been part of Colombia since their independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century until it became an independent nation in 1903, immediately prior to the building of the Panama Canal. This parting of a single nation into two owed more to political and capital interests than to cultural and social differences and the voice of the rural populace. During my first research in Panama, I knew that I was working within a social, cultural, and economic zone whose tendrils stretched beyond the isthmus into Central America to the north and beyond the Darien jungle in the south into Colombia, which is the principal reason I subsequently went there. Between the two fieldwork areas, however, there were differences.

The Panama village was located in the hot, exceptionally humid lowlands in the center of the country, about 150 miles from Panama City and the Canal. These difficult conditions, which pertained to much of the country, had deeply affected the original laborers on the Canal, although most of the severe diseases that once characterized the area were under control by the time I reached Panama. Even so, the Panamanian interior—as it was known—was not a popular site for city dwellers or profit-making concerns. The area was poor in resources and distant from accessible markets. Few of the original inhabitants could be found, even in the most inaccessible areas, for their numbers had long since dwindled. Those who remained spoke Spanish and lived much like the rural people I studied. So secluded had the rural folk been over the past centuries that they still used some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish phrases.
that were not heard elsewhere. There was little written history about them, although it became clear to me that they were inheritors of Spanish traditions that characterized other parts of Central and South America. Living in thatched houses with stick and mud walls, these agriculturalists dressed simply, went barefoot or with homemade sandals, and used (or “threw”) the machete and a few other steel-tipped tools to provide their necessities. The people relied on slash-and-burn (or swidden) agriculture, while the earth from which they drew sustenance was hard and crusty in the summer and very muddy in the rainy season. This hard-working folk raised rice, plus some beans, maize, and garden crops, and they were just beginning to raise sugar cane as a cash crop when I arrived. I was continually amazed at their good temper and capacity to work in the heat, humidity, and seasonal rains, especially given their forgotten and low status or marginal position in society.

The physical conditions in Colombia were the opposite. There my colleague and I worked along the higher ranges of the Andes that stretch from the north of the country almost at the Caribbean to the south where the country borders on Ecuador. At those heights, it was often bitterly cold with some rain, frost, and chilling winds. Almost everywhere potatoes were grown, tubers and garden crops supplemented them, and people traded to complement their foods and to meet other needs. As in Panama, the tools were steel-tipped, but agriculture was based on the use of the hoe rather than fire, and we found some oxen-drawn plows. Housing conditions were simple, and the people worked hard.

Given the large distance between the areas, as well as the divergent ecologies and dissimilar crops, I expected the local economies to be very different. To my surprise, whether in the margins of lowland Panama or the Andean heights of Colombia, the economy—more exactly, the house economy, with its current of vital energy and ritual basis—was almost identical throughout this vast area. Practices, words, and values were so similar that one could use the findings from one country in the other. So striking was this discovery that my colleague and I decided to spend our time in Colombia exploring this type of economy from the north to the south of the Andean range.

Models

Economists rightly take pride in the beauty, simplicity, and robustness of their models. Elegance and coherence are watchwords—if not the keys—to their persuasiveness. With this in mind, they should be fascinated and impressed by the local models in Colombia and Panama because they are coherent, imaginative, and workable—at the margins of markets. They are explained to the inquiring anthropologist with lucidity, are elaborated with examples, and display their robustness (which economists so often value) by including new information. They also afford a sometimes grim reflection on our economy. When we turn to these local models of economy, the differences between markets and mutual formations sharpen. We have diagrams, equations, and statistical models to show us what happens in economy, but there are other ways to communicate
that provide different pictures and implications. In Panama and Colombia, the rural folk have a model of economy that uses the image of the house as their model. Like a diagram in a textbook, the figure of the physical house presents a picture of the economy. I think of their imagery as a model or as a metaphor in which at hand or local experience is drawn on to think and talk about material life. Should we be surprised? Directly prior to Adam Smith’s revolutionary model of economies with markets at their center, James Steuart used the image of the house to discuss the ordering of a nation’s political economy. Even before then, the mercantilists in the 1600s and 1700s and the bullionists in the 1500s held views about wealth and the balance of trade that partly reproduced a house model at the level of the nation. Following Adam Smith, Karl Marx built a model of economy that revolved about an infrastructure and a superstructure. Today, we model economy as consisting of functions, equations, forces, and systems. These images may be useful for our times, but are they less metaphoric than those I encountered in the field?

**Economy’s Current**

In Panama and Colombia, all the material acts of the economy—planting, tending animals, harvesting, cooking, consuming, and caring—are significant, not only for their overt material effects, but also because they point to something else. They embody strength or force. Crops, say the people, provide strength to humans (and to animals), and humans need this strength to live and work. When strength ends, so does life. This strength is a manifestation of God’s power.

I translate the people’s word, *la fuerza*, as strength and as force. More than physical power, strength is the energy that people need and use in all of life’s doings. Even these glosses of the term do not fully capture the word’s meanings, which resonate with older uses in English. The strength in crops and in the house is like *vis vitae*—life force or the energy of life—that humans must have to live. When vital energy ends, life is extinguished.

Strength is the current of the people’s economy, and I venture that it is like a currency as well. An economist peering over my shoulder might scoff that it is not money, for you cannot see or handle it, as if our money were always tangible. For him, this currency seems vague or abstract, as if our currency represents something about which we all agree. One difference is clear: vital energy is a material current or is represented by material things that embody it, whereas our currency can be material, such as a commodity or coins and bills, but usually does not refer to the material sphere of economy. Market currency lies on the outside of the body and can be gained and traded with others, whereas the current of strength is within the body and living things. It is gained, used up, replaced, traded, and shared with others. As one person explained: “In working you are using the strength of food. One uses up health and energy. When you eat, you replace this strength. You eat and use up. This goes on and on in the body. People suffer when they do not have enough force to work. They are using up their health. You have to maintain yourself.”
The current of strength comes from the earth and other elements that include wind, rain, and sun. The constituents of this life current are found in some inert materials as well, such as carbon, which is a reservoir of strength accumulated in the past. Humans do not create these sources of strength, nor do they create strength itself. Instead, they secure, transform, and remake it. They are conveyors but not creators of strength. As the people say, their work "helps compose" strength, that is, they put it together in ways that can be used by themselves and others. Their work is like that of the artisan and craftsman. In Panama, for example, the slash-and-burn farmer who raises rice is seen in the image of a barber who styles hair. After the forest is burned and the field is seeded, the agricultural artisan weeds or "cleans" it, which he can do in three ways: by waving his machete "clumsily" over the weeds, by "trimming" the weeds slightly, or by "breaking the skull" of the earth. He then "cuts" the harvest that has grown, after which he cleans the "stubble" off the field so that it can be planted the following year. In this economy there are no high entrepreneurs who seek to master nature through innovations and create economic growth. These local economists see wealth in terms of a cycle that is naturally limited and must be carefully managed. They occupy a humble position in their economic model that assumes limits to accumulation.

Humans consume the strength that has been gathered in one year's agricultural cycle to return to farming in the next, where they expend it in work that assists the land to provide more. By eating from the earth, animals live by strength as well. Work done, whether in the fields, at the house, or elsewhere, represents the use of strength. Things made, whether tools, furniture, clothing, or houses, emerge only through the use of strength, whose expenditure they embody. The house stores this strength as food for sustaining its inhabitants. This current of economic life is biological and ecological. As the current of economy, strength is rather like force and energy in the natural science sense. The notion of strength could be compared to the conservation and entropy of energy, or the first and second laws of thermodynamics. By the first law, energy is neither created nor lost in a process; rather, it is conserved. According to the second or entropy law, the form of energy or the potential for its use changes. In some respects, this is what the people of these regions mean when they speak of composing and then expending or using up (gastar) strength. They have a conservation, organization, and entropic notion of force or vital energy. For example, according to their model, the strength in soil, water, and wind is preserved as it passes to crops and then to humans, who assemble and use it up in living and, by planting new crops, help to compose more strength.

After a day of work in the fields, a man may say that he is spent, exhausted, or used up in the sense of a flow of strength, but that he will be able to work again on the morrow. He does not say that he is weak or feeble, which would signal a deterioration of his body. People also say about depleted soil that it is tired or exhausted, by which they mean that it no longer has strength or elements to give to crops. As they explain, the energy has passed elsewhere and is no longer available in that plot of land or resource. When I asked about using fertilizer to help the land produce again, people responded that applying
fertilizer only moves strength from one place to another, which is not a creation but a use of strength. Even allowing a forest to grow and then burning it to let the accumulated nutrients in the trees fall to the earth does not create strength; rather, it puts strength together from the rain, sun, wind, and soil.

The current of strength ebbs and flows between humans and the environment, making people part of the natural world. It not only connects them to the environment but also to a spiritual force, for strength is in the world only by the “power” or “might” of God. The economy is not anchored by a belief in human creativity, as in Schumpeter’s entrepreneur; in the existence of unlimited resources, as some believe; or in the hope that the future may be different. Instead, it is anchored by a God who not only provides hope and legitimacy for actions but also the conceptual basis for the economy, which is founded on securing and sustaining a current of strength given by Him. When speaking about securing strength from the earth, the people use the word ‘give’ as in “the land gives,” and when harvesting they say that they “take” the ripened crop. A successful agricultural cycle reaches the point of giving by the earth and by God and of taking by humans, who must “return” or put back what they take in order to receive more. They sometimes compare this process to a trade, but it is never “measure for measure.” They put work and wealth into the earth, but it returns something different and more—for seed and labor, the land returns food.

Strength, the people say, provides corporeal food during the week, and God’s power provides spiritual food on Sunday. One often hears a man, when planting seed, utter a small prayer, “May it come up well.” Acting with faith in the material future as one tills, plants, harvests, and cooks is an act of faith in God’s power to provide strength. Economy performed expresses a belief in God as much as a belief in God is made manifest in economic practices. Let us sharpen one connection to high-market economies. Is the desire to store up a current of strength backed by God different from our desire to store up a current of money backed by a nation?

The agricultural cycle is not predictable. Sometimes the land yields an abundance and sometimes a scarcity, but one does not know in advance. Some land yields more strength and some less. When harvests are small, the rural folk say, “The earth does not give this year.” Their use of the word ‘give’ expresses that the most important component of their economy—strength—lies outside their control: it is a contingent gift of the Divinity. Once in the high Andes of southern Colombia, a hard-working agriculturalist proclaimed, “Ah, raising potatoes, it’s a luck, it’s a fortune.” Others speak of agriculture as “a gamble” or “a lottery” or part of one’s destiny. “What is luck?” we asked in Colombia. “It is what you do not control,” was the answer. Another farmer explained: “We agriculturalists, we are adventurers.” The same notion of luck applies to making handicrafts, pottery, and other ventures. “Luck,” some would say, “is for some people but not everybody.” The outcomes are uncertain because ultimately they depend on a giving power that is unpredictable.

Many in high-market economies, I think, would not respect these practices and statements. Our technicians of the markets persistently try to veil uncertainty
as risk for insurance or arbitrage purposes. Our helpful over-the-shoulder economist might say that this outside, unpredictable agency is an ‘exogenous variable’, which is not accounted for by the (market) model. It is, however, part of the people’s model, because giving in their economy starts not with the individual or social relationships but with the Divinity. The divine gift of vital energy or strength, offered without recompense, underpins the economy—but it is an unpredictable fortune.

In Colombia, my colleague and I sometimes asked whether God, who is all-powerful, could create more strength or force for the world and so replenish what had been used. People replied that they had not seen it happen, and they were uncertain whether it might happen. Being emboldened, we then asked, if everyone needs strength to work in order to replace the strength they use up, from where did they first get the strength to work? The people would respond that their strength to work came from the house and its base, thus drawing on the house model. With this image in mind, we refined the question and asked one group, if it takes a base of savings to make a base, from where did the first base come? For some moments, we were met with silence. Then, with a typical play on words, one man said, “Your questions make us feel like we have no ‘base.’” The people were stumped, and there was silence until another person responded, “God gave the first base—it was the Garden of Eden.” Her answer, elegant and succinct, brought closure to their model of economy as a system of circulating wealth. God provided the first base, ensuring the system by giving a world of elements from which more strength may be composed by working.

The people may speak of sustaining the house, but they are not claiming that their economy is sustainable. On the contrary, again and again I heard life described as a “struggle.” I puzzled about the use and meaning of this word for longer than I would have liked. Did it refer to a physical struggle with the environment? Did it mean that the larger economy presented a struggle? Did it mean a competitive struggle with others? Or did it refer to an existential struggle to understand the world? I now think that the term has primarily a material sense. Maintaining the self and the house is a struggle. Even if the elements of life’s energy are given, getting and composing them for use is an unending effort. Thus, when a man says that raising potatoes is a fortune, he means more than chance or luck: raising potatoes is his fortune for securing strength.

The House

In Colombia and Panama, the physical house provides a model of economic processes. For example, the crops are said to “sustain” or “maintain” the house—they “support” it. The house is not physically made of the crops (although roofs may be constructed of thatch or sugar cane leaves). The crops support the people and through them support the physical house and the house economy. When a house exchanges goods or labor with another house or on the market, its labor or goods are said to go “through the doors outward.” When a house is self-provisioning or self-sufficient, it acts “from the doors
inward.” Keeping the doors closed, a house holds its work capacities and products for itself. For example, raising crops to eat in the house is considered to be work inside the doors, although it physically takes place outside the house. And when workers stop for a snack in the early part of the day, they “buttress” their work for the house with the food. The house model presents an image of the economy as, ideally, a closed unit. It has borders to be maintained in order to hold strength.

In Colombia especially, the people talk about the “base” or “foundation” of the house, which means more than its physical underpinnings. The base is the wealth or the strength of the house that is inside the doors, even if part of it is outside. The base refers to all the food stored or kept in reserve at the house, to the tools and other equipment the house has, to the past work the house has put into the fields, to all the animals it keeps, to the physical structure itself, and to the land being worked. Thus, when a new agricultural year begins, the people talk about “returning” to agriculture, in the sense not only of beginning again but also of using what they have in the base to return to agriculture and then return again with new base. The house lives on a continuing cycle of strength flowing from base to environment to base through people. When the base is replaced through work, the house supports or sustains itself; when the base is more than replaced through work, the house advances. But when the base is not replaced through work, it is depleted, and if that continues over time, the house falls into “ruins.” I call this shrinking process, which can occur in agriculture or in market trade, ‘debasement’. Debasement extinguishes the house economy and points to a collapse more total than is suggested by our word ‘bankruptcy’, for a house in ruins has no outside social supports or communal welfare. Debasement represents more than a loss of money, for the crops that are gained in the field, stored at the house, consumed as necessary, and considered to be the central part of the base represent more than food to eat. Their disappearance is the loss of life’s vitality.

The people support the house by caring for or “looking after” (cuida) the base, which means holding and being thrifty with vital energy. They do not claim to have a sustainable economy, and they do not mean that they have a sustainable system when they talk about sustaining the house. But they do have a clear model of living in a material and not a monetary world. They cannot buy or trade themselves out of its limits. Their current is not expandable by a fractional reserve banking system: it can only be used with more or less care in order to preserve it. In high-market economies, we speak as if the entire economy expands or could be made sustainable. But that is nonsense. The economic model of the house in Latin America is a more realistic conception of an economy that must be cared for because it has material limits. Do the rural agriculturalists have a more acute sense of material boundaries because they live in a material wealth economy as opposed to an economy of commercial or financial wealth? Their understanding that achieving house sustainability is difficult and that one needs to be thrifty leads to a cautionary view. Would they ever be caught up in carbon trading, as if moving the elements of strength from one place to another would solve resource and pollution problems?
Sharing Strength in the House

The common term for a couple who live together is *juntado*, which means together, united, joined, assembled, and, by extension, connected. This connection or conjointness is the relationship on which house economies and the larger community economy are founded. When a male and female work together in the house, they are doing more than complementing each other in their separate labors—they are joining the strength of each. Material sustenance in the house is a product of joint efforts or a bringing together and uniting of separate contributions of strength. By living on this joint product from the past and then conjointly composing more strength through its common use, they double, redouble, and double again their joining of strength, or in their common phrase, “from both to two” (*de ambos à dos*). Their joint work, with that of the other inhabitants, makes the house a shared site: each member is increasingly a product of and contributor to the vital energy of the others. They become connected or conjoint persons through offering and receiving the energy and life force of the others and then returning it to them in more work. The house is the *locus classicus* of sharing, which makes house connections in this material economy very different from market contracts and from reciprocity, as some anthropologists understand it. It is not simply sharing food from the hearth that connects people; rather, each comes to share and embody the strength and life of the others, and to embody their own strength through that contributed by others who incorporated their vitality.

Some time after my wife and I left Panama, our first child was born. When I returned with pictures of her a few years later, people proclaimed that our daughter looked Panamanian. When I inquired why—because they also claimed kinship on the basis of family resemblance—they explained that we must have been eating food from Panamanian land when she was conceived. We shared the strength of the earth with them.

I have always been impressed by rural people’s ability to undertake diverse tasks; it is not multi-tasking but many-tasking. Not everyone undertakes the same work, however. In Panama, people say that men are for the fields, women are for the house, and children help or assist both. In Colombia, people say that men’s work is heavier and women’s work is lighter. However, they add that neither is more valued than the other: the two work together like a team of oxen. In Panama, I once made lists of men’s work and women’s work. But in doing so, I was assimilating their work to a market model of specialization, and the division of labor does not capture their model and practices. The house is not constituted by a replication of tasks in which each does the same as the other, nor is it a production line. The work is jointly done with both men and women pulling together and toward one another. In joint work, each relates to the other and assists or helps in the shared project, which is to secure strength for sustaining the house. There are disparities in the efforts and in who gets the returns, but people do not keep formal accounts of who does what, although differences in tactical or short-term efforts are noted. A house does not have an underlying gauge by which work is made comparable.
and counted for distribution of the rewards. The principal house transaction is sharing, not tit-for-tat, barter, trade, reciprocity, or give-and-take. I am not suggesting that people in a house are blindly altruistic or that they do not think and act by some of these metrics, but sharing is different. It creates a union of strength in work whose results come back to each person. Sharing is sometimes assimilated to market reasoning, where it becomes a calculation about efficient uses and distribution of resources, especially in theories about the usefulness and efficiencies of a commons. But a regulated commons is not the same as joining together or combining strength, which creates a house, an economy, and relationships.

Current or Currency?

In Panama, men would talk about having a meal with rice; then they would make a fist, clap their other hand on the fisted arm’s bicep, and grunt “Umph” with satisfaction. Rice, they were saying, gives strength for working. I found the same gesture in Colombia, but there it involved different food—the potato and sometimes beans. The main crop (rice, potatoes, maize, or beans) was talked about as having special strength and being needed in order to work. For example, in Colombia, one person said, “Maize is basic, it provides all the strength—for humans, chickens, and pigs. It all comes back to maize. The basics are the support of one and the family, from breakfast to dinner to clothes. They are all products of the land.” In both areas and elsewhere, people talk about “necessities” or what they need in the house to survive. I expected to find a common list, but it varies from region to region—even from person to person—and sometimes includes market products. I now realize that household necessities have their touchstone in the idea of vital energy. These necessary goods provide the strength needed for living.

I never heard people talk about quantities of strength, compare crops by amounts of strength, or use volumes of strength to measure other things. The people do count, however: they count harvest sizes, seed needed, workdays done and workdays remaining, the size of work tasks in paces and body lengths, the number of tasks needed to complete a job, how long a store of food will last, how many animals they have, and more. Each is a separate measure, like taking someone’s temperature, weight, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels but not summing them up into a single number or body profit. In rural areas, there is no final measuring rod (such as money) or bottom line (such as profit). The wealth of a house is diverse with different embodiments of strength.

Our onlooking economist might want to compare a Colombian or Panamanian base of material wealth, consisting of tools, foods, animals, household goods, and the physical structure of the home, to the market notion of capital. After all, capital also has many forms—inventories, equipment, land, patents—which we convert to money values. We even speak of ‘social capital’, as if human relationships could be monetized. Our over-the-shoulder economist might add that even if some forms of modern capital are more labor-saving
or productive than the Panamanian machete or digging stick, the distinction between base and capital is only a difference of technological development. The economist might even embellish the argument by saying that people will measure and compare when asked to state their preferences, which shows that values do fall along a scale and are ranked and that people use these scales to choose in a rational manner. But the question and the questioner induce the scalar response. In the house economy, the current of strength has many forms and is not counted. Everywhere people ‘care for the base’, given their house needs and capacities. However, caring for the base is done more by touch and feel or by groping than by rational calculation—just as Walras’s auctioneer, who oversees the achievement of general equilibrium in all markets by clearing all prices, does so by groping (tâtonnement) and not by advance planning. Planning, measuring, and adhering to a value scale are realistic activities only in a world that is thought to be controllable by decisions based on probabilities or measurable risk rather than luck.

**Thrift**

The key economic process in the house centers on the expenditure or use of strength. The people try not to waste or use their vital force without putting it to work. God’s original giving or provisioning of the natural elements must be supplemented by the struggle to compose these elements, because the strength obtained is continually expended afresh. As the people would say, “Maize gets its strength from the vegetables in the land. Humans have to help put them there, and they use the strength of work to do so. Their strength is used up; you do not see it.” Solely securing strength from the earth through crops or animals does not make a house economy successful, however, because the current, including the work of production, must be managed well. Good management means organizing and being thrifty or “making savings” and economizing. We think of thrift as saving rubber bands, threads, shopping bags, and containers or as storing and reusing leftover food. But thrift is more pervasive and is practiced more creatively in the house economy: food remains are kept; shortening and sharpening a broken blade or making a new handle repairs tools; clothes are mended and refashioned. Little is thrown away on the hope that it might be reused. A piece of thin clear plastic that was cast aside in a marketplace becomes a raincoat in the wet, cold mountains; a broken brick becomes a hearthstone.

The dynamics of thrift in the house are different from the dynamics of profit making in the market. Both are means-to-ends acts; both have to do with limited means; and both unfold over time. But thrift presumes that the stream of wealth is limited, whereas profit making may expand the stream. With thrift, one limits the use of the means—whether a ball of thread, a pot of food, or money for purchases—in order to have leftovers for the morrow. Making savings is a cautionary act, taken in the face of an uncertain future. Thrift preserves what one has. Profit making can include being thrifty, for example, when buying less
expensive resources, which is directed toward minimizing the means. But in profit making the focus is broader than the relation between means and ends: profit making centers on the difference between the ends and the means, and then on the relation of this difference to the means, that is, on the profit rate. Profits are consumed, saved, and invested, whereas the concern of the thrifty house is to have a remainder of strength. A potato, rice, or maize harvest is managed parsimoniously. The leftovers are a savings, a hedge against the future, and part of the base for continuing the economy. In words that were repeated by many others, one man said, “If the seed finishes, everything ends. If I had only a sack or two of potatoes, I would seed them before eating them. And I would never sell the potato completely—how can you end it? You always need some for seed.” In contrast, in making a profit, all available money may be thrown into investment, if calculations of return and risk suggest that doing so is warranted. Profit making may draw on making savings in order to fund investments or it may incorporate parsimony in the process of seeking a gain, but the savings are not necessarily preserved over time. Making a profit is a more encompassing project and a different way of relating ends to means, although the house action leaves its trace in the market practice.

A signal difference separates thrift from profit making. In the house economy, thrift refers to the use of materials. It is a concept about the current of strength and the substances of wealth, whereas in a market economy, thrift is measured in a currency. The first revolves around a flow of strength in materials with expenditures (gastos) from it; the second refers to a flow of money and uses or costs (costos) set against it. They are related because money costs are one type of material expenditure in the house; however, not all expenditures are money costs.

But now we reach the point at which the house economy contradicts and opposes yet supports the market economy. Making savings or being thrifty has an ambiguous history in economic theories, which now largely ignore it. Here is the problem: through thrift, leftovers are created in a material current. These remainders can be kept for the future. But how does a growing material fund fit a market economy and the use of currency? House ‘keeping’ opposes the dynamics of the market that requires house and corporate spending, which was the central argument of Keynes. Hoarding hinders market consumption. In the early 1800s, J.-B. Say argued that there are no hitches, no stoppages, and no slacking in the circular round of economy. Broadly, from Say until Keynes (with the exceptions of Malthus and Marx), the general theme was that, through the wages paid and the purchases made, production creates the necessary buying power for consumption—that is, production creates its own demand. Keynes saw otherwise. In uncertain times and recessionary periods, he observed, people hold on to what they have and become thrifty as precautionary moves. They create hoards, which is the household practice. Do not we all curtail our spending, use leftovers, and make do in bad times? But the household that keeps its stock of vital force for itself hinders the market, which requires that money be spent in order to stay in motion. Today we think we can circumvent this dialectic of the house and market by inserting
government spending into the cycle and expanding the currency supply. But does this macro-action replenish the household cellar of strength or leave it bare while increasing national debt and house dependence on the market? In slack times, must the house economy expend its base, as well as prolong and increase its monetary debts, to float the market? Exploding personal debt to banks, on credit cards, and through mortgages is a signal of this debasement or dissaving of strength.

Connections

The cycle of vital force that sustains the house economy in Panama and Colombia connects house members within the dwelling, making them shared persons, one to another, while also connecting a house to the past and to other houses in a community. To receive strength from the Divinity through the environment, house members must first draw on a prior accumulation of strength to compose more. This strength from the past is stored in the base, so there is always a giving from the past to the present as well as from the Divinity and the environment. The giving is both material, as manifested in the substances of the base, and conceptual, as expressed in the knowledge that is required to sustain a house. The people’s claim that the first base was the Garden of Eden expresses this dependence on the past and on the Divinity. Each house is part of a continuous venture, with advances and reversals or the accumulation of reserves and shortfalls.

The house is a component of a long-term community, yet it also participates in a contemporary setting where it engages others outside the house through transactions of strength. This exchange has several modes: reciprocal or exchange work, festive labor, and hospitality on a small or grand scale. Even if a house is nearly self-sufficient, it still needs outside help in agriculture and other activities. One way to secure this strength is by exchanging labor. Sometimes days of labor in the same work task are exchanged; on other occasions, days are exchanged in different tasks. This exchange between houses is neither barter nor market trade. The people talk about “assisting” one another and use metonymic (or part for whole) expressions to indicate the exchange, such as “arm for arm,” “rib for rib,” “back for back,” “loaned arm,” “loaned hand,” “returned hand,” or “returned arm.” These phrases express the equivalence of the exchange and the delay in the return. When I first heard these terms, I interpreted them as shorthand ways of talking about the exchange of body efforts or labor. They are, but they signify something else as well. Work is an expenditure of vital energy, and the people are talking about exchanging the expenditure of strength. In fact, their general term for this trade of labor between houses is “strength for strength.” Vital energy assembled by a house is given, received, and returned between houses so that each may be sustained.

For example, a small group of men may decide to rotate their efforts in agriculture, pastoralism, or another venture. They share their vital energies by helping each to maintain his house. When strength is traded between houses,
the recipient house feeds the workers. The laborer is supported by immediate strength from the receiving house while his stored strength is expended. The hosting house provides strength for the expenditure of work while it receives strength that will replace its base. The meaning of the exchange is displayed when laborers are fed a cooked version of the food that they are harvesting. Sometimes they are given a small portion of the raw harvest on which they are working in addition to the meal. Both offerings are material supports and tokens or promissory returns for the strength received, and they signify exactly what is being exchanged. This extension of house sharing places the strength or base of one house in that of another and vice versa. Through this exchange, houses and their members contain the vital energy of others; strength is distributed among and connects people and houses. Sharing in the house through joint work and common consumption, which makes each person connected to the others, provides the model for exchanges between houses through which there is a broader sharing of vital energy connecting one to another.

More complex are the collective work gatherings that have a ritual and festal element, even if they sometimes are ambiguous in intent and can be used to exploit or appropriate. A man who has a special task to accomplish, such as building a mud-and-thatch house or gathering a large harvest, may call a junta or gathering for a particular day. His helpers arrive early in the morning and stay until the task is completed. The host owes a day’s return to each participant, although this payment is often attenuated or not made, and he also provides food and drink. The preparations start days in advance. All the materials, as in the case of a house building, must be assembled and readied for construction, and the food has to be gathered and partly prepared by female house members, sometimes with help from women in other houses. The local brew, made from maize, may take days to ferment. The workers, who are invited weeks beforehand, are unpaid but receive the host’s nominal obligation to work at their juntas, and they are supplied throughout the day with home-produced food and drink (which, valued in currency, is worth more than what they would receive in cash for their labor). Participants sing, dance, joke, and talk as they work, until, toward the end of the day, their efforts slacken. The host might do better by hiring labor, but he would not be able to recruit the number needed, because the festal nature of the gathering is an attraction. The event also gives the host a degree of communal prestige for being able to put on a house building, organize the gathering, and display the reservoir of strength at his command. This work gathering is one-sided, for immediate strength from food is traded for long-term strength embodied in a house or other endeavor. It is more attenuated than work within the house, but it remains a form of sharing and reciprocity that connects people by a current and, in so doing, denies the existence of the autarkic being.

Our over-the-shoulder economist might interject that the host of a junta could better utilize his scarce resources for building a house by offering a higher wage in place of the food and the drink that dampens the day’s efforts. However, a switch from current to currency would cost the host money, which he does not have, whereas the festal gathering that is underwritten by the
current of strength allows him to save money or to be thrifty through the use of house food and drink that is supported by unpaid labor from his house. Our shadow economist would have a useful observation if the work of a junta were directed at making a commodity that could be sold. My Panamanian friend might have put his mud-and-thatch house up for sale; people could draw on junta labor to harvest rice or potatoes to sell. In such cases, the host of the work would be using unpaid labor to secure a product that is sold for cash. I did not hear about this use of festal gatherings, but the larger process of transforming current to currency or one circuit to another is of central importance in understanding how economies on the margin often participate in markets and lose their foundation. The economistic calculation and practice breaks up local connections and house sharing.

Sometimes the current of vitality is used up in a festivity and not turned to work. In addition to everyday hospitality by which tea or coffee may be shared, occasionally a house will host a celebratory moment, such as a baptism or marriage. Food and drink are served, and a stringed instrument may be hired. The vital energy of the house is shared with others. Whether large or small, such events represent an expenditure of strength that brings no material return. This transaction is different from all the others in which the base is maintained through economic cycles. People remember these celebratory moments with relish, and when a house holds an extraordinarily large celebration, perhaps once in a lifetime, the people talk about “throwing the house out the window.” Flamboyant yet precise, the expression signifies that life’s current leaves the house not through the doors, as in a normal trade, but by an opening that does not admit a return. Human vitality is expended without care as the house turns itself inside out. By ‘wasting’ (expending) its strength and placing its base with others, the house debases itself and sacrifices its future for communal recognition by spreading its identity and life force to others.

Conversely, the house that never helps or assists others deprives them of a connection. Even more, the house that receives strength and does not reciprocate this vitality takes the life of others. Reciprocity denied is a killing force, which is as much a part of reciprocity’s meaning as life’s vitality shared. At once the base and the gift of life, the source and dissemination of identity, the product of sharing that is to be shared, and the way of connecting to others by sharing one’s life, economy’s current can be an ambiguous power.

Conclusion

Like a flaming torch, this ethnography from Latin America throws sparks in multiple directions. It shows how a current of vitality constitutes and connects people to one another, provides a materialist account of economy, and demonstrates the connections that link people to a limited earth. It blurs the division between human society and the environment and suggests that sharing, rather than reciprocity or rational selection, is the fundamental economic practice that supports individual livelihood. It suggests that life’s uncertain current has
a mystical or divine basis. It displays the contrast between a social current and a market currency and implies the need for a different way of ‘measuring’ the socio-environmental impacts of an economy. Lastly, it shows that economy is a social ritual, from prayers for production to the sociality of exchange to festivities of consumption—all refer to a current of relationships that are maintained or disrupted. Economic acts are significant not only for their material effects but for what they do for sociality, which is subject to fortune.

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Notes

1. A friendly reader objected to my word ‘surmise’ as not inspiring confidence, but I use it advisedly to mean conjecture or hypothesize. I am well-acquainted with ethnographies of Spanish-speaking agriculturalists in Latin America and occasionally find in them hints of the concept of ‘strength’, and a few ethnographers with whom I have spoken seem to agree that it is in their material. The reader also will find that the concept resonates with older European ideas, such as vis vitae (vital force). I believe that this complex is an ethnographic discovery and so suggest its possible existence elsewhere.

2. Gísli Pálsson (2009) offers a non-dualistic account of life with his concept of ‘biosocial relations’. I am indebted to him for sharing his interesting work while I was writing this article.

3. Most of the information about Panama was published in Gudeman (1976, 1978), but I am supplementing it here. The material about Colombia was largely printed in Gudeman and Rivera (1990).

4. The root word is the same as that of the term juntado, used to describe a couple who share strength to maintain their house.

5. Participants like the food return and joining forces with friends and acquaintances, but group work is not always convivial. I have seen knives drawn in the late afternoon at a junta, although without result.
References